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SERMON CLXXXII.

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DISASTROUS EFFECTS OF LITTLE SINS IN CHRISTIANS.

Ecclesiastes x, 1. *Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savor: so doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honor.*

THE love of reputation is natural to men. God has implanted this love in the human heart to subserve a benevolent purpose in the present scene of our being. And the individual who has so far perverted this part of his original constitution, as to feel no regard for the good opinion of the wise and the virtuous, is prepared to become the pest of the community, and the perpetrator of the foulest deeds of darkness. To the native desire of the individual for the esteem of others, may be referred much of that courtesy and common kindness which diffuse their blessings over the various circles of society. But no man, in this country especially, is *born* to the inheritance of a good name. He must *merit* it by his real or supposed virtues, before it will be awarded to him. And it is not a rare or solitary act of goodness, however imposing, that will secure to the individual that "good name, which is better than precious ointment." As it is with care and caution that the apothecary compounds and prepares his precious perfume, so a fair reputation can only be obtained by combining in their just proportions, and exhibiting in their fulness and harmony, those elements of character that meet the approbation of the better part of society. But while such is the difficulty and delicacy of establishing a character for wisdom and honor, it may be easily lost, utterly lost, without destroying all or any of its great and prominent qualities. "Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a bad savor"—yet these flies bear but an exceeding small proportion to the whole substance of the ointment in which they are lodged. Character, like perfume, then, may be destroyed without a destruction of all its principal component parts. Let but a little folly attach to him who is in reputation for wisdom and honor, and it may utterly ruin his influence. This is the truth exhibited for our contemplation in the text.

The object of the remarks that follow shall be—first, TO NOTICE SOME EXEMPLIFICATIONS OF THE TRUTH, THAT COMPARATIVELY TRIFLING DEFECTS DESTROY THE REPUTATION AND INFLUENCE OF A PROFESSING CHRISTIAN—and secondly, TO INQUIRE INTO THE REASONS OF THIS.

I. First, then, we are to notice *some exemplifications of the truth, that comparatively trifling defects destroy the reputation and influence of a professing Christian.*

Every professor of religion is at first, by his very profession, in reputation for wisdom and honor. He is supposed to have taken a wise step, to have assumed a lofty stand. He has claimed connection, intimate alliance with

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the Source of all honor and moral excellence. Must he then be guilty of some flagrant violation of the divine law, before he can lose his character and influence?—No; a *little* folly will destroy them both. He may not break the Sabbath, nor swear profanely, nor steal, nor be chargeable with falsehood, nor with gross and palpable injustice, nor with habitual neglect of the social and secret worship of God. He may not be impure or intemperate, a railer or false accuser, an unruly or insubordinate member of the church. He may neither be quarrelsome nor insolent with his neighbors; and yet he may have that in his character which will as effectually destroy his influence as though he were guilty of much greater enormities. Let him be reckless and imprudent in the minor points of Christian conduct. Let him heedlessly or wilfully postpone the claims of justice, even in little matters. Let him have a little of self-confidence, and a meddlesome forwardness—some share of self-will and unyielding pertinacity of opinion—some irascibility of temper that cannot brook contradiction, or bear to be overborne by the opinions of a majority of his peers, without throwing him off his balance and causing him to speak unadvisedly with his lips;—any one of these may be amply sufficient to destroy his influence, though that charity that hopeth all things and believeth all things, may both hope and believe still that he is a Christian. Or take a professor of religion, otherwise irreproachable, but who has the unhappy habit of giving the highest coloring to his representations, of using great exaggeration, of making loose and *somewhat* distorted statements, of taking a little poetic license in the narration of facts; and though no court, ecclesiastical or civil, could convict that man of palpable lying, yet there is a fly in the ointment, and the savor is offensive. The man's Christian character and influence is a perfect nullity. Take another, in other respects unblameable, but who is known in his business transactions to go just as far as the *letter of the law* will permit in getting the best of a bargain—who evinces a peculiar shrewdness, not to say *cunning*, in calculating the bearings on his own interest of certain unsuspected legal phrases in a contract—who can satisfy his own conscience, and attempt to justify to others, the advantage he has thus gained by saying that it is *perfectly legal*—that the other contracting party acted voluntarily and with his eyes open. Now, though such a one can neither be convicted by a church session nor a civil court, of *illegal* bargaining or *dishonesty*, yet his reputation as a professing Christian, and his influence in the church of God, are somewhat worse than a cipher! Again: suppose an individual, who is not chargeable with any approximation to overreaching in his dealings with others, and whose reputation is respectable in the eyes of men generally, except that it is known that he loves exceedingly to retain what he has honestly acquired, irrespective of any demands of God or man on his substance: let it be known that he always receives applications for contributions with a mal-grace: that, when the object presented for his liberality is one of unquestioned propriety and benevolence, he admit it, but fill his mouth with objections: that he will resort to apologies and excuses, the weight of which it is to be suspected he does not himself feel: let it be known that to all questions of this kind he has a set of negative answers—answers which show that he clings inordinately to his gold—that he loves it *in itself*, instead of as *the means of doing good* to a dying world; that he is somewhat, at least, inclined to avarice and covetousness; and though this be not regarded as a disciplinable offence by the church—(and I do not see why it should not be, for the New Testament declares it to be IDOLATRY;) yet what is that professor's character worth in the estimation of an enlightened Christian community? Worth just as much as his treasures will be to him, when God takes away his soul. And even where there is not such an approach to downright covetousness—where there is no such approximation to that "love of money, which is the root of all evil"—no such *idolatrous* attachment to riches, yet it is possible for the individual to be guilty

of a littleness of soul—a parsimonious meanness and management in pecuniary affairs, that will as certainly undermine and destroy the character and influence of a professing Christian, as avarice and covetousness in their grossest forms.

Let us now contemplate a professing Christian, free from all these defects of which we have spoken, but prone to a certain unbecoming levity of spirit. Such a one may not attend theatres, operas, balls, or dancing and dashing parties. He may frequent no haunts of dissipation and mirth—nay, he may not be habitually found in the society of the trifling and the thoughtless. But there may be a certain effort at dress and fashionable appearance, a certain love of attracting attention and winning admiration, a prevailing desire to be witty, a love of showing off a little, an unrepressed gayety and levity of spirit, a disposition to trifling and puerile conduct in the absence of customary restraint, moments of frothy conversation and vain jestings, and some leanings occasionally to very thoughtless companionship. Now, though the individual to whom these things attach, never proceeds to such lengths as might at all make him liable to the formal discipline of the church, yet what effect have they on his reputation and influence as a professor of religion? It is true, they leave him in his place, untouched by discipline as a member of the church, but the fragrance of his good name they have not only destroyed, but caused that name to send up an odour highly offensive to all that is grave, dignified, and consistent in piety.

Or suppose an individual to be at a great remove from all that is gay and trifling, suppose him to be serious and punctual in all external observances, sufficiently grave in all his intercourse with the world, possessing a moral character of no positive faultiness, somewhat zealous and enterprising in benevolent efforts; yet let him be inclined to a murmuring, restless, dissatisfied spirit, rather disposed to censoriousness, mostly or always differing in opinion respecting the most simple matters from the majority around him, greatly alive to the defects and blemishes of others, complaining that every thing in the church and the world seems to be going wrong, and disposed to innovation and change, provided it be of his own dictation. Now in all this he may do nothing really worthy of disciplinary stripes. He may not in the judgment of the candid bring his own personal piety into doubt, and yet his salutary influence as a Christian is as utterly destroyed as though he had been guilty of some heinous offence: there are at least enough of “dead flies” in the ointment to destroy its fragrance, if not to cause it to send forth a positively bad odour.

We may now examine the effect of a little folly in one who is in reputation for wisdom and honor as a father or head of a family. Such a one, in order to lose his character and influence, need not be destitute of natural affection, he need not be a stern and arbitrary tyrant in the domestic circle, imposing the iron yoke of his despotism on the weak and unoffending necks of his wife and children, and inflicting brutal violence on those whom God and nature require him to protect and cherish. Nor on the other hand, need he neglect all discipline and yield up the reins, and leave his children to run without restraint in the course which their ardent and wayward desires may dictate. He may not allow them to spurn his authority in the graver matters of their duty, to break over the restraints of an external morality, and violate the Sabbath, or profane the name of God, or steal, or utter falsehood, or frequent places of gaming, and drunkenness, and lewdness, and riot. He may not permit them to offer a direct disobedience to any of his positive and prominent requirements as a father, and yet there may be a little folly attaching to him in this relation which will destroy his own influence and ruin his children, as inevitably as more glaring delinquencies. Let him fail to exercise a vigilant inspection over the *forming habits* of his children; let him yield his authority, contrary to his own conviction of right, to the persuasive im-

portunity of his child; let him connive at the child's ingenuity to avoid collision with his known will in a given case, and yet to carry its own point; let him sometimes accept a partial and reluctant obedience; nay, let him even hold the reins of his parental government with an *unsteady hand*, and what will be the effect on his reputation as a Christian father, and what the influence on his children? The evidence of his folly, however small it may appear to himself, will come before the public as soon as its effects have ripened into maturity in the character of his children. Whatever may be his other excellencies, the world will not respect him as a judicious *Christian father*. His little folly is sufficient effectually to destroy the fragrance of that good name, which attaches to the exalted character of a discreet, consistent, *Christian father*. And it will equally destroy his influence on his own children. Having learned that they may, in some instances, succeed in avoiding a cordial and unqualified obedience to his reasonable requisitions—that they may carry their point by management and persuasion—their reverence for his parental authority is gradually weakened, the strong ties of filial respect and fear become loosened, the charm that bound them in implicit obedience to a father's will and wishes is at length dissolved, and the progress to insubordination, recklessness of all restraint, and to ultimate ruin, is neither slow nor uncertain. The destruction of character and hopes amongst the children of professing parents, is never effected by great and crying parental delinquency. A "*little folly*" in those who are in reputation for wisdom and honor as Christian parents, hath done this! "Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth!"

Once more: the truth of our text is strikingly exemplified in the case of some *ministers of the gospel*. The more delicate the perfume, the more easily destroyed by a small ingredient of an offensive kind. So the higher and more sacred the reputation for wisdom and honor, the more easily ruined by a *little folly*. To lose his character and influence, it is not necessary for the minister to be infected with gross heresy, or to be guilty of gross immorality; he needs not be chargeable with indiscretions as palpable as those that mar the character of ordinary Christians. Nay, he may preach the *truth* eloquently and fervently; he may have a general honesty and uprightness of intention; some degree of sincere desire to do good. He may be laborious in his official duties; an example of liberality to the poor, and to all objects of benevolence; industrious and careful in his studies; attentive in his visitations to the sick, and to his flock generally: but let him be known as a man of somewhat rash and imprudent temperament, or as possessing a hauteur and ill-judged independence, wounding to the feelings of others; or let him be prone to occasional levity, excessive fondness for anecdote, and an unrestrained indulgence of his sense of the ludicrous; or let him be known as a little inclined to be insidious and managing; a little disposed to the compromising and turning of a merely secular policy; somewhat desirous of the praise of men, or at least a little too sensitive respecting his own popularity: any one of these, however small, if persisted in till it become habitual, will undermine and ultimately blast his reputation, and blot out his name from the records of a respectable and useful ministry. How many men of talents are at this day wasting and waning under defects entirely too trifling to be made the objects of an ecclesiastical process, or even to bring their personal piety into doubt. Dead flies are, however, in the ointment, and its original purity and fragrance only serve to enhance their offensive odour. The very *transparency* of the consecrated vessel that contains them, serves to magnify those impertinent intruders in the eyes of the spectator, and prepares him to receive the greater offence from their ill savour. It may well make the serious mind to tremble, and the sensitive heart to sink in anguish, to think how a *little folly* may utterly destroy the character and influence of him who is in reputation for wisdom and honor as a minister of Jesus Christ.

II. Let us now, in the second place, *inquire into some of the reasons why it is that a little folly will thus destroy the character and influence of a professing Christian.*

1. One reason of this is, that *the Christian, by his profession, creates large expectations respecting his character.* His profession lays claim to all those exalted and ennobling attributes which belong to regenerated human nature. He professes to have experienced a great moral change, so radical in its influence on his being, that the sacred scriptures denominate it a "new creation"—a "being born again"—a "passing from death unto life"—from "darkness to light"—from sin to holiness. He professes to be the friend of God, the disciple of Jesus Christ, the temple of the Holy Ghost. He affirms by his profession that he has solemnly "renounced the hidden things of dishonesty;" that he has thrown off the spirit and maxims and customs of a guilty world, as no longer to interfere with, or influence his conduct; that he is actuated by a higher and holier principle—by that supreme benevolence to God, and that impartial love to man which the sacred scriptures require; that he has adopted rules of life so gloriously pure and rigid, that they require him, under the most solemn sanctions, to "abstain from all appearance of evil." In a word, that the great law of his renewed nature is strenuously to aim to be holy even as God is holy. All this, and other specifications that might be added, are involved in a public profession of religion. Is it not natural, that such a profession should create large expectations in the world respecting the character of him who makes it? He gives an illustrious hostage to public opinion—a pledge that he will sustain no ordinary reputation for wisdom and honor. The world have accordingly high expectations; and, forgetting that the Christian does not profess present perfection, they regard him as though he did. Now where there is such a high profession on the one hand, and such enlarged expectations on the other, it is manifest that a comparatively trifling defect attaching to such a character, will be as the dead flies in the ointment of the apothecary. The same obliquity which, in the case of one *not* in reputation for wisdom and honor, would pass wholly unobserved, will be amply sufficient in the case of the Christian to destroy his character and influence. Nor does it matter that the world are unreasonable in their requirements, and expect too much. We must take human society as it actually is, not as it should be, when we are examining the reasons of trifling defects on the reputation of the Christian. If men are unrighteously severe in condemning the Christian for a little folly, it is not the less a fact that his reputation with them is destroyed, and his influence neutralized and lost. The want of charity in the world to overlook his slightest faults, ought only to prove a more powerful stimulus to him to avoid the very appearance of evil.

2. A second reason why comparatively trifling defects blast the Christian's reputation, *is to be found in the fact, that most men judge, whether right or wrong, that little things often furnish a clew to the general character.* That this is true in many instances cannot be doubted. Hence the adage, that "straws indicate the current of the ocean." And it would be true in regard to a little folly in the professing Christian, were there not certain counteracting influences in the very principles of his renewed nature. Were there no humiliation in view of the least perceptible folly that attaches to him; no sincere penitence on its account before God; no resistance offered to it; no habitual resolves and efforts in divine strength to overcome it, then that little defect would furnish a proper clew to his whole character for piety. But the world sees not the operations of this counteracting influence. The Christian's *folly* is before the world, openly; but the deep humiliation which it occasions, is an exercise of his soul in retirement. The tears he sheds over it are wept in secret, and seen by none but the omniscient eye; the resistance he opposes to it is amongst the secrets of his own heart; the resolves and

efforts which he makes to conquer and to root it out from amongst the habits of his soul, are not matters of public observation. Hence the men of the world take the little folly which they see attached to him as the proper data on which to form their estimate of his whole character. All his excellencies are thus tarnished and go for a thing of naught. They attempt to explain them away, or account for their existence in the professing Christian, through his hypocrisy, or his love of the praise of men, or it may be his fear of falling under the censure of the church, or his desire to promote by such fair appearances some secular and selfish end. Thus it being assumed that these visible though small defects are a proper clew to his general character, that character is destroyed, and the Christian's influence worse than lost, in the judgment of such men, by a little folly.

3. A third reason of this fact is, *that the world abounds with that envy which is anxious to reduce all excellencies of character to its own level.*

There are some men who live only to be tormented by the good name of others. Of small capacities and very stinted virtues, they are nevertheless gigantic in the single desire of fame. Popular esteem is their idol. With the love of this as their ruling passion, when they find themselves consigned to an unnoticed mediocrity, their disappointment and chagrin speedily distils the bitterest envy. If genius or moral worth rises within their view, and soars and sheds glory from its wings—like the crows in pursuit of the eagle they must need chatter at it, though it is far aloft beyond their range on its shining way toward the sun. There are those who consider all others that are in better reputation than themselves as their rivals and natural enemies. No matter what species of excellence it may be for which the individual is distinguished, it is sufficient to secure for him their envy and hatred. These passions burn like the smothered fires of the volcano, and struggle for an opportunity to break forth and blacken the reputation of that individual, till it is of the same hue as their own. Such men have adopted *the equality principle* in regard to the characters of others, and are determined never to rest till they have done what they can to reduce them to a level with their own.

Now as envy cannot exist without some materials, fabricated or existing in fact, you may judge, my hearers, with what avidity it seizes on the trifling defects of the Christian, and commences its diabolical work of ruining his good name. But for these defects it would lack all the materials that could afford any probability of success to its infernal machinations. *With this little folly in him who is in reputation for wisdom and honor, as the basis, envy can construct its stories, throw out its surmises and insinuations, and ruin a name otherwise better than precious ointment.* While then our world is the theatre of the dark and guilty passion of envy, this will afford one reason why comparatively trifling defects in the Christian will serve to destroy his character and influence.

4. A fourth and last reason of this may be found in the fact, *that wicked men hope by magnifying these comparatively trifling faults of the Christian, and injuring his reputation, to quiet their consciences in view of their own grosser sins and deformities.*

There are some men who fear no disturbance to their consciences so much as that excited by the consistency and pre-eminent holiness of the lives of Christians. They can hear the finest theories of religion, and listen to the most overwhelming evidences of its truth, and still strive to persuade themselves and others that it is *but a theory*, not capable of being actually reduced to practice. They may be warned by all the terrors of the Lord of the wickedness of their way, and of the woes in which it will terminate, and yet if they see no marked difference in character between themselves and those who profess religion, their consciences can still repose in quiet. But if the holy and unblameable life of a Christian—one whose character is as free from

imperfection as even the world can reasonably expect it to be—throws its light in upon their darkness, conscience is troubled. These men are then afraid that there is such a distinction of moral character as the Scriptures assert, between the righteous and the wicked. And if there be, they know that their case, while they continue what they are, is hopeless and deplorable beyond expression. To silence conscience then, they must do one of two things—either repent and be converted, and become holy, or endeavor to persuade themselves that there is not much difference between the character of those who are highest in reputation for piety and their own. The latter is the easiest and the most grateful to the depraved heart, and withal the least humbling to its native pride. Accordingly such men seize on the little folly connected with the Christian, though it be but as the spot on the disk of the sun, to shield the eyes of conscience from the tormenting splendors of full-orbed Christian character. They withdraw their attention from all his preponderating excellencies, and fix it strongly on his most trifling defects. These they exaggerate and magnify, and make the foundation of more sweeping conjectures and suspicions, till, through the deep deception of their own hearts, they persuade themselves, and would fain persuade others also, that the best Christian is after all little if any better than themselves. Thus wicked men feel as though their peace of conscience were staked on the success of their efforts to make a *little folly* in the professing Christian the means of destroying his character and influence. How effectually they succeed, the bleeding cause of Christ in our world abundantly shows.

And, my dear Christian friends, it is vain for us to complain of such a constitution of things. God permits it, to impose on us the necessity of the highest possible attainments in holiness of which our present condition is capable. God holds up all these reasons, which we have been exposing, to show us why it has been and always will be true, that “as dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savor, so doth a *little* folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honor.” A truth big with terror to the thoughtless, uncircumspect Christian, as it is with infinite disaster to the interests of piety in the world.

We may infer from this subject, then, *the obligation of Christians to be peculiarly circumspect in regard to things that may seem as trifles compared with the more prominent and imposing parts of Christian character.*

My Christian friends, it will not suffice for us to be careful that we are not guilty of any direct immorality—that no one shall be able to lay palpable and flagrant sin at our door. The restraints of society, and our regard to public opinion, will ordinarily save us from any thing gross and revolting in our moral conduct. It is not here that we are to double the watch and fortify the walls of our religious character. The towers and battlements may all be stable and strong, while the wicket-gate to the heart may be unbolted and ready to open at the touch of the enemy. It is against the *little* obliquities of Christian conduct that we are most sedulously to guard. It is *here* that the sternest circumspection is required. We have seen that our religious character and influence can be as effectually destroyed by a *little* folly, as by more flagrant crimes. We have seen that there are many reasons why this must be so. We have seen that the very profession of the Christian, on the one hand, and the exorbitant expectations of the world on the other; that the habit of judging of general character by little acts; that a leveling envy, and a desire of quieting conscience amongst the wicked by exaggerating the faults of Christians, are all operating as so many causes to take advantage of a *little folly* in him that is in reputation for wisdom and honor, for the destruction of his good name and influence in society. What then is the manifest and imperious duty of Christians thus situated? Verily, that they walk circumspectly in *little things*—not as fools, but as wise to foresee the fatal consequences to their reputation, if they neglect this duty. With what

care ought they to set themselves to the task of watchfulness in this respect! Conscience is feeblér, less sensitive and wakeful, in proportion to the estimated littleness of these defects, in themselves considered, and without reference to the mighty sweep of their destructive power on Christian character and influence. How necessary then to stir up our vigilance and circumspection, by looking at the inevitable consequences of what may be softened by the name of mere *frailties* or *failings*! They will in the end, if not arrested, work out a destruction of our Christian reputation and influence, as certain, and deep, and dreadful as the most palpable immoralities could do. They will leave us as mere spots in the church's feasts of charity—as clouds without rain, to shut out the moral sunshine and dews of heaven from this parched and barren world. In themselves they may be little things, but in their destructive power on our good name, they “do the work of tempests in their might.” “Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, be sober, be vigilant, gird up the loins of your minds, see that ye walk circumspectly,” in that which is *least* as well as in that which is greatest—remembering that the world waits to receive its deepest convictions of the purity of your conscience, the strength of your religious principle, and the influence of the love and the fear of God on your hearts, *from your scrupulous regard to little duties.*

Finally—We may remark from this subject, *how strange it is that professing Christians should be so insensible to the guilt of what are deemed LITTLE SINS.*

If the preacher inveighs against profaneness, or intemperance, or lewdness, or Sabbath-breaking, or theft, or fraud, or falsehood, or any of the grosser crimes, they are willing to hear him, and to shudder for that professor of religion to whom aught so flagrant can be applicable. They think that if they were in his condition they would be overwhelmed with a sense of guilt, and would give up all hope. But when the man of God dwells on the blemishes, or the petty defects of their Christian character, there is scarcely enough of sensibility in their consciences to keep their attention to the subject. They look away from these to the more prominent and imposing excellencies of their character as abundantly counterbalancing them. Why, brethren, why such torpor of conscience amongst Christians about little sins? If they are sufficient to destroy your good *name*, and your Christian influence on a dying world, why may they not suffice to put conscience in an agony till penitence and the blood of Jesus remove them from the soul? What is your existence worth to God or to his universe, when you are as salt that has lost its savor—when you are stript of the reputation and the influence of a Christian? What though you may get to heaven at last, and be “saved so as by fire?” Will you have fulfilled the high responsibilities of your standing on earth—your connection with mortals? Did God design that on your way to immortality you should be a mere negative thing—should exert no permanent goodly influence? And yet such must be the certain result of *little sins* indulged. And does it constitute any *palliation*, that you barter your name and influence at a price *so small*? Oh, can conscience sleep over those little things, which yet are so great in their consequences as to disrobe you of the exalted attributes of a *consistent* Christian, and throw you as a dead weight on the struggling energies of the church, and finally dismiss you from the world as little better, perhaps, than a cumberer of the ground! My dear Christian friends, wherever else conscience may sleep, Oh, let it not do this over *little sins*. Here let it wake up, and weep, and lead to fervent, agonizing prayer, till, through abounding grace, you may stand confessed before the world, “blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke.”

SERMON CLXXXIII.

BY REV. D. L. CARROLL.

THE WISE RECKONING OF TIME. A NEW-YEAR'S SERMON.

Psalm xc, 12. *So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.*

THE course of time has ever been the subject of sublime and melancholy musing. The sacred writer, in the context, introduces this topic by some of the most tender and beautiful imagery. Whether the lapse and vicissitudes of time would bring upon an unfallen spirit that impression of poetic sadness which we feel, it is not easy to determine. Did the mighty current of years roll on over a sinless world, it would probably associate to the minds of the inhabitants nothing but images and anticipations of brightness and glory. But upon apostate man, time, in its flight, casts a deep shadow from its wings, and awakens emotions of strange and undefinable sadness. The great changes that have been effected, the decay and ruin of the proudest monuments of human power, the wreck of generations gone by, and the unrevealed mysteries of the future, fill the mind with associations mournfully sublime. How little and impotent does man appear, as he views himself, borne along on the tide of years, as the leaf on the bosom of the mighty river, without any power to arrest or direct its course. We might, my hearers, to day yield ourselves up to mere sombre musings on this subject; but the psalmist has shown us "a more excellent way" of improving the swiftly passing moments. "So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." What a suitable prayer in view of our hurrying existence here, and of its infinite and enduring issues hereafter. If life is so brief, so fleeting, Oh teach us, thou Author of our being, so to estimate what remains, as to make of every moment the best possible use.

Brethren, on this first Sabbath in the new year, may not we, with great propriety, make this prayer of the psalmist our own. "So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." As Christians, then, how shall we make a wise computation of time? Such a computation will require us to have some reference to the present circumstances of society, and to the prospects opening on the world.

I. I remark, then, first, that we ought, as Christians, to appreciate the opportunities presented, of *making great progress in knowledge—in intellectual improvement.* Inspiration has decided, that "for the soul to be without knowledge is not good." There have been periods, however, when knowledge and intellectual culture were not so manifestly demanded of Christians as at present. In those periods the enemies of religion had no means of being in advance of believers as to general intelligence. On the other hand, they were indeed, for the most part, their inferiors. Knowledge then was looked upon very much as the monopoly of the church, and the little that did exist was to be found principally in her monasteries and her schools, such as they were. Most opinions, instead of being judiciously weighed, were inculcated and received on mere authority. But time in its progress has brought a very different state of public sentiment. The intellectual elements of the civilized world seem to be stirred with an unwonted commotion. The flood of ages has swept away a multitude of barriers that once limited the range of mind. And the improvements in the arts and sciences furnish facilities now for extended and intense intellectual action, such as the world has not

witnessed. Such an action has really commenced. The claims of every system of doctrine—the claims of every form of government—of every institution, social, political, or religious, are now subjected to the investigation and scrutiny of a mass of minds unawed by authority. *Public opinion* is now becoming the great arbiter in all questions. Every thing is tending to show, that the human race will soon be under no other government but that of *mind*: that, whatever may be the instruments which it shall use, *intelligence* will be the *arm* that will rule the world. And every form of ecclesiastical, political, or social order, which cannot be supported by reason and obvious truth, is destined to be subverted and remodeled by the omnipotence of mind. Men of the world are aware of this, and are numbering their days with reference to it. They are ceasing to glory in war, and in mere animal prowess, and are striving to possess themselves of disciplined and vigorous intellect. They see that the future battles, which are to distinguish our world's history, are to be the mighty conflicts of mind—marshalling its forces, and meeting in the shock of a gigantic strife on the great line that divides truth and reason from error and absurdity. The mighty struggles of *antagonist principles*—principles, anchored in the depths of capacious and richly stored minds, are to constitute the materials for the future historian in his book of the wars of men. Now what is the duty of Christians amid circumstances and prospects like these? Ought they not to cherish ardent desires after knowledge and intellectual improvement? Ought they not to redeem more time for this object? How will religion maintain her supremacy at such a period, if its professors are inferior in knowledge to the mass around them? Nay, how will they long retain the territory already enclosed within the limits of the church, if *they* are indolent while the hosts *without* are “running to and fro,” and increasing in knowledge? Those hosts may come and “take away their place and nation.” And why is it that worldly men can be such untiring devotees in the pursuit of knowledge? Is the love of intellectual power or of literary fame a motive to exertion stronger than those which the gospel presents to Christians? By no higher ends than earth can afford, a multitude of unsanctified minds have been stimulated even to death in the career of mental improvement. Time, health, riches, life, have been sacrificed in the overreaching of their souls after knowledge. But every Christian has infinitely higher motives to impel him to make acquisitions of true science. If he be asked why he is laboring to obtain stores of knowledge, he can answer, because “*the Lord hath need of them.*” He knows that he can bring every acquisition, and lay it down, an acceptable offering, at the feet of Jesus. He knows that *mind* is the great instrument through which the Redeemer is to effect those eternal purposes “that pertain to his kingdom and glory.” He knows that every capability developed, every item of strength gained, is giving power to this instrument, and fitting it to be wielded with greater effect by the hand of the master. Who that thinks of the great ends which the infinite God accomplished by Moses, and the part which his mind, “learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians,” performed in the stupendous drama of the world; or, who that has looked upon a Paul going from the feet of Gamaliel with all his intellectual treasures to the cross, and from the cross travelling in the greatness of his mental strength to the ends of the civilized earth, a chosen vessel bearing infinite blessings to millions, can help feeling the irrepressible risings of a holy emulation to grow in knowledge, and grasp every intellectual attainment within the reach of mortals?

Would that Christians now, with far brighter prospects, might so number *their* days as to apply their hearts unto wisdom! Let it not be said that such great attainments are reserved for the favored few that appear at distant intervals. This need no longer be the case; and would no longer be the case, were not the church culpably ignorant or negligent of her high privileges. There is no necessity that the great mass of Christians should remain com-

paratively unintelligent. Every church might now be organized into classes for mutual instruction. Adult Bible classes might be *everywhere* established. Why not as extensively as the Sunday School system, if the church felt as she ought, that knowledge was power? And I see not, in view of the signs of these times, why all the more intelligent members of the body of Christ do not owe a solemn duty in this respect to their less informed brethren. Every Christian family, and every Christian church, ought to be organized on the plan of imparting the greatest possible amount of instruction, and of raising to its greatest elevation the intellectual standard of the members. I am persuaded that the most happy results would follow the organization of churches into classes for mutual instruction and improvement, where those of all ranks in society should mingle together. It would destroy invidious distinctions—would prevent the jealousy of the poor toward the rich, and impart a very important kind of information to the rich themselves: it would make them acquainted with the habitudes of thought and feeling amongst their humbler brethren, and exhibit to them the peculiar forms which piety wears in the common walks of life. Some of the first statesmen in the world are directing their efforts to the diffusion of knowledge amongst all classes. The late Lord Chancellor of England, it is said, projected the plan of the Penny Magazine, which has now a circulation of some hundreds of thousands weekly. An example worthy of our richest and ablest citizens. But how long shall “the children of this world be wiser than the children of light?”

The great facilities for communicating knowledge to all ranks at the present day, point out, as with the finger of God, the duty of the church to be up and doing. The religious periodicals, tracts, and varied forms of useful intelligence which mark our day, put intellectual improvement within the reach of all. And the ease with which a livelihood may be gained in this country, and the labor-saving improvements in machinery, afford more or less time to all to be devoted to this purpose. And let it be remarked, that the humblest and most obscure Christian in the church knows not what progress he may make in knowledge, if he will only prize it more than money, and number his days wisely with reference to its attainment. In illustration of this, permit me to give you the history of a case that occurred in the place of my own nativity. A lad of fourteen years was, by the providence of God, left an orphan, without any one sufficiently interested in him to offer him a home or employment. After the burial of his mother, he went to a neighboring town and hired himself to an innkeeper as a hostler. He had, as may be supposed, but a partial English education. He, however, found some Latin books, and redeemed moments to attempt their perusal. He was not afforded even a candle, but he used to gather shavings during the day, and burn them on the kitchen hearth at night to pursue his studies. Yet such was the progress he made, that when it was first discovered that he had turned his attention to Latin, he was able to read Horace, one of the principal Roman authors, with ease and accuracy. He was then taken by a benevolent gentleman and fitted for college—no hard task. He entered the college at Princeton, and graduated with the first honors. He then studied theology, afterwards became the president of a college in Pennsylvania, and at the age of thirty was called from earth, as we trust, to a sphere of far more elevated usefulness and glory.

Let not, then, the humblest individual here to-day, despair of great attainments in knowledge; they are within reach. God made your mind for knowledge, as much as he did your eye for light. And the “day-star” of intelligence hath emphatically visited us. Set your aim high this year, and follow where it leads, and your “path may be as that of the morning light.”

II. In numbering our days wisely, we ought to count upon the opportunities presented for *forming an elevated religious character*.

More knowledge, valuable as it is when connected with holiness, when severed from this, is but the strength of Samson deprived of his eyes. We

shall have numbered our days to little purpose, if we do not make broad calculations of growing in *grace* as well as in knowledge. And, my hearers, the signs of the times in reference to this object deserve very serious consideration. No period, perhaps, has ever furnished such elements for forming a high order of moral character as the present. It is admitted that those truths of God that have remained the same in every age, are the basis of religious character. The Bible and the Holy Spirit are God's instrument and agent in the sanctification of a revolted world. But it is equally true, that *circumstances* may greatly facilitate their operations in transforming the character of man. Let it be remembered that the agency of the Holy Spirit, and the nature of God's truth, are such that they can and do lay hold of all the great and complicated events of time as auxiliaries in their work. The effect of imposing and exciting events, in developing talent and forming worldly character, is so universally acknowledged, that it has given rise to the adage, "that man is the creature of circumstances." Now it cannot be supposed, that the great moral events that crowd into a particular period will have less influence in forming religious character, when coupled with the combined agency of the Spirit and truth of God. There have been periods when the current of years flowed on without any striking incidents adapted to effect remarkable changes in human character—dark ages, when a shadowy stillness seemed to hang over the stream of time, beneath which the mind of generation after generation slept away its being, unagitated by any of those strong excitements which give new lineaments to the heart of man. But such, it will be admitted, are not the days we are now numbering. This appears to be the seed-time of a new and higher order of religious character in the church of God,—the time that has prospective reference to the millennial harvest. This we might infer from the very condition of the world around us. If the future historian gives this portion of the nineteenth century its appropriate name, he will call it "*the age of INTENSITY*" in every department of enterprise and activity. There seems to be an amazing waking up of the powers of human nature, preparatory to some great changes in the condition of man. The mechanic and the merchant feel themselves to be under some new and undefinable impulse, that is driving them onward in an enterprise and speculation of which they once had scarcely a conception. Statesmen are grasping the subject of politics with almost the energy of desperation. The walks of literature are becoming crowded with a jostling and breathless throng of aspirants. And even vice and atheism themselves are assuming something of that boldness and intensity which characterize them in hell. Now piety, if it exist and be in exercise at all, living in the midst of such unwonted excitement, ought itself, by the very force of circumstances, to become more intense. Yes, it may and ought to assume a loftier and more decided character, from the spirit of the times.

But there are other events at present more peculiarly adapted to form a high order of moral character. One of these is the *awakened attention and increased facilities for studying the Bible*. The disastrous eclipse which had obscured some of the great truths of revelation for ages, has now passed off, and they are coming out on the vision of the church in unveiled splendor. At no time since revelation was completed, have there been such means and opportunities of a wide spread and intimate knowledge of the oracles of God. Now, if the truths of these oracles, more dimly seen, formed such characters as Luther and Calvin, Baxter and Flavel, and others of like exalted attributes, what transformations may not their unclouded lustre now effect, under the influence of the Holy Ghost?

As another event in these times, adapted to form religious character, we may notice in some respects a *salutary change in the ministry of the gospel*. It is now freed from many of the incumbrances of former ages, that destroyed its power on the conscience and the heart. The ministry has become, in

some measure, what God always designed it to be, a great organ of deep and practical impression on the human mind. It has become a lucid expositor of the claims of God on the immediate services and affections of men—holding up his unchangeable law, exhibiting in a clear manner the *true* grounds of the sinner's guilt, and condemnation, and dependance—holding out a full, free, sincere offer of pardon and eternal life to all without exception—putting the responsibility of the sinner's choice of life or death just where God puts it, and where it properly belongs, *on himself*; and charging him with the guilt of rebellion against God for every hour that he delays repentance and cordial obedience to the gospel. The ministry now, instead of exhausting its powers to engage professing Christians in an unholy war for mere rites and forms, brings the precepts of Christ, that respect the practical, everyday graces and duties of life, directly upon the conscience and the heart of the church, and labors to form Christians to *habits* of untiring and holy activity. It is *active*, rather than *mere contemplative* piety, that is now inculcated—a *benevolence wide as the world*, rather than *the love of a sect*—the luxury of blessing a sinking race, rather than the mere enjoyment of insulated and solitary religion. Now it is easy to see, what an influence such a ministry is adapted to exert in forming a high order of religious character.

Another fact bearing on this point is, that the days which we are numbering, are days in which "*the glorious ministration of the Spirit*," in that form which it took after the ascension of Jesus, has become more pervading and effective than it has been since the day of Pentecost. It is now, indeed, "searching all things, yea, the deep things of God;" it is proving a "discerner of the thoughts and intents" of many hearts; it is making an extended application of its regenerating and sanctifying power to multitudes of minds in Christendom, and sealing the blessings of redemption on a scale more commensurate with the tremendous exigencies of a dying world. Under such an administration of this great author of the Christian graces—this transformer of the human mind, the Spirit of God, increasing in manifestations of power and efficiency as we approach "the last times," the moral character of the church may and ought to assume a new intensity and glory.

In addition to all these, we must not overlook the obvious influence on Christian character that may be exerted by the vast system of benevolent enterprises which have been originated in our day. What an influence have great political schemes exerted on individual and national character. Does not all analogy, then, lead us to suppose that the great moral plans of this age may exert a moulding power upon religious character? Both the intellect and the heart of the church are beginning already to be dilated with the lofty conceptions, and the overwhelming emotions, associated with the work of filling the world with Bibles; of flooding it with religious tracts; of training, for all its perishing millions, an adequate ministry; and sending into its deepest recesses of darkness, the missionaries of light and love, of peace and salvation. This state of things in the church is too recent to exhibit, as yet, those great results in the formation of religious character which it is adapted to effect. But who does not see that it furnishes the elements of an order of moral character amongst Christians, such as the church has not witnessed since her apostolic days?

In view, then, of all the circumstances mentioned, does it not become us, in wisely numbering our days, to make a new and mighty reach after greater attainments in holiness? What is to prevent us from taking a far higher rank in the scale of moral character than the generations that have preceded us? What shall hinder us from rising above the mists of past centuries, and shining in all "the beauty of the Lord our God?" What shall hinder young Christians in our day from mounting, as on wings of eagles, and soaring nearer and nearer, with more than the eagle's strength of vision, to the Sun of righteousness,—bathing themselves in the living light of his beams, and

becoming "changed into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord?"

III. In numbering our days wisely, we ought to count upon *exerting a far more widely extended influence as Christians*. Such are the laws of our intellectual and social being, and such are the relations and connections of one mind with another, that an influence of some kind we must and shall inevitably exert. The *kind* of influence exerted, and the direction which that influence shall take, will be one of the most solemn items of man's last account to his God. The elements of Christian influence are knowledge and holiness. The degree of knowledge and holiness, particularly of the latter, will measure the extent of the Christian influence which an individual or a church may exert. This indeed is an argument why we should number our days with a reference to intellectual and spiritual attainments. But those treasures of mind and heart which we acquire are not to be hoarded as the miser's heaps of gold. The times that are passing over us constitute the great *working* period in the history of our world—the *practical* age of the species, when *utility* takes precedence of all theory and speculation. Capitalists are now making larger and more advantageous investments. Politicians are grasping at a more extended influence over the popular mind. The business and pleasures, the wealth and elevation, and advancement of the human race, are now projected on a mightier scale than at any former era in the chronicles of time. Does it not become Christians, then, with their eyes on the signs of these times, to count with a holy enthusiasm on a deep and vastly extended *Christian* influence over their fellow-men?

I am persuaded that we have too low an estimate of the possible power of Christian character. In numbering our days, then, with reference to a large investment of the capital of Christian influence, let us look at what has been accomplished by some uninspired men of no very remarkable mental endowments. Who does not feel an emotion of the sublime, as he contemplates the immeasurable impression which Richard Baxter made on his generation, and on succeeding ages, though he lived in an intolerant and stormy period of the religious world's history? What a controlling sway he held over the consciences and hearts of multitudes! How wide, and deep, and enduring the influence which David Brainerd exerted, even in the state of society which existed in this country almost a century ago! And what shall we say of a Mills and a Martin, a Hall and a Payson, "who being dead yet speak?" It is hardly presumptuous to say of such spirits, that, like the language of the planetary orbs on high, "*their* line has gone out into all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world." Now the time must come, nay, it *has* come, when we ought to consider these cases not as *exceptions*, but as the *legitimate measure* of Christian influence, and fix *our* aim accordingly. Let us remember, too, how many more facilities of making our influence to be felt we possess, in our day, than did these holy men. What an easy, rapid, and extensive intercourse can we now have with society, compared with that enjoyed half a century since. With what a multitude of minds can Christian character come in contact in a comparatively short period. How much more available is the power of holy example now than in those past days, when population was more sparse, and the means of personal intercourse more restricted. What an organ of extended Christian influence does the religious press constitute. This, under God, is to be the angel of Christendom, "standing in the sun,"—the great dispenser of the church's moral light to the world. Think, too, what instruments of power are put into the hands of Christians by the organization of the great benevolent societies of these times. They can thus truly extend themselves, in an important sense, "beyond their own measure,"—can stretch out the arm of mercy and pour light on the darkness and miseries of the whole earth. We can cause our Christian influence to be felt alike in the regions of the rocky mountains in our

own land, and along the rivers and bays, the hills and valleys, of Asia and Africa. Besides, that very excitability of the popular mind, which we have already noticed, furnishes a peculiar facility for an extended Christian influence. There is a *strange moveableness* in the general mind of society. An illustrious exemplification of this is to be found in the history of the temperance reform. The popular mind has become susceptible of being set in motion now, by causes that a quarter of a century since might have exerted all their power without attracting notice. Society craves excitement of some kind, and will have it. Why, then, should not the representatives of Christ—the lights of the world—make their influence to be felt *extensively*? The world is not “without souls”—men have consciences and hearts—they have hopes and fears respecting an eternal hereafter. Why, then, should not the exhibition of the high attributes of Christian character—the power of pre-eminently holy example—if brought in earnest upon the mass of ruined yet immortal mind, begin to make that mass heave and move under the impulse, heavenward! Has not that Christianity which we profess, the elements of a mightier excitement to the popular mind than commerce, internal improvement, politics, literature, or the arts? It certainly had, as *lived out by Christ and his apostles*, and primitive followers. It superseded the excitement of Judaism at Jerusalem, of philosophy at Athens, and of arms at Rome, and became the object of absorbing interest to the then known world. Christianity is still unaltered, and that human nature on which it is to operate is the same. If the solitary influence of Paul, then, circled half the civilized world, what a mighty reach combined Christian influence might now make on the ready excitability of the general mind! Let the church of God, then, wake up, and in wisely numbering their days let Christians count on an indefinite extension of their moral power. Let them aim at nothing less than an influence which shall break up the monotony of sin and death, and move the entire fountains of the great deep of thought and feeling in human society. This is the only excitement that is safe for man, or that will satisfy the popular mind. All the agitations and tumults of the race prove that the soul of man, mighty even in its ruins, is blindly reaching after those objects of exciting magnitude and glory, which can alone be found in pure Christianity. Let us determine, then, by the grace of God, to send out a Christian influence in a length and breadth that shall control these infinite but ill-directed aspirations of the immortal mind!

Another consideration to urge us to aim at extending our Christian influence is, that *the world in these days is held in a general expectation of some vast movement about to be made by Christians*.

The world does not calculate that the standard of Christian character, and the measure of Christian influence, will long remain what they have been and now are. It is presumed that *piety* will feel the impulse that is urging onward, with such momentum, every department of worldly activity. The community has heard much about the church's resurrection from the sleep and moral death of ages! The public mind has been turned to the recent marshalling of her forces. Infidel jealousy is watching the effect of her comprehensive plans of influencing the moral destinies of the race. A multitude of unsanctified hearts are brought within the reach of her deep and mighty sympathies for the miseries of the whole world, and a multitude of minds are eagerly contemplating her recent purposes and resolves, that that world shall be redeemed. Worldly men see that the mind of the church is beginning to be turned in expectancy and hope of a coming millennium: that there is a pervading apprehension of the near approach of that *grand crisis* in which “the kingdom and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven shall be given to the saints of the Most High God.” They know that Christians regard the present as *the Saturday evening of time*: that they are saying one to another, The Sabbath, the great Sabbath of the

world "draweth on." Worldly men, then, expect to see the disciples of Christ coming forth in that energy of character, and that extended sweep of Christian influence, which will prepare themselves and the world for such a sublime consummation.

My Christian friends, what should prevent us from determining, in reliance on God, that we will meet this expectation of the world? Nay, is not the honor of our holy religion periled if we fail to meet it? The measure of former attainments, and of former efforts, will no longer sustain the credit of Christianity. If we would honor Christ and sustain the interest of his cause, we must overtake and go beyond the anticipations of the world on this subject.

Lastly: As a motive to numbering our days wisely, with reference to a greatly extended Christian influence, let us frequently and solemnly call to mind *one grand end which God has in view in his eternal existence.* God lives and reigns with *this*, amongst other great ends in view, viz., *that he may exert an influence in kind like that of pure Christianity.* It is one great aim of his being, to bring forth and impress on the minds of his rational creation, the eternal truth and purity of his own character. He administers the affairs of the universe with the steady view of exerting the highest and best moral influence over its intelligent millions. Is it not wise, then, in Christians, to count upon exerting the greatest possible degree of the *same kind* of influence?

Beloved brethren, carry with you through this year, and through life, the undying conviction that *progress in knowledge, in holiness, and in enlarged Christian influence, is your great business*—the grand object to be counted on in your estimate of time. And though your days may be few or many, spend them all under the soul-animating and heavenly influence of such an object. We know not who of us are appointed unto death *this* year. But for such as are, will it not often the dying pillow to sink down upon it, not in indolence and mental stupor, but in the *increasing swiftness* of our Christian career? And will it not add unspeakably to our eternal joy, to be able to say in death, "I have fought the good fight, I have *finished* my course, I have kept the faith?"

"The world can never give
The bliss for which we sigh,
'Tis not the whole of life to live,
Nor all of death to die.

Beyond this vale of tears
There is a life above,
Unmeasur'd by the flight of years—
And all that life is love.

There is a death whose pang
Outlasts the fleeting breath:
Oh! what eternal horrors hang
Around the second death!"